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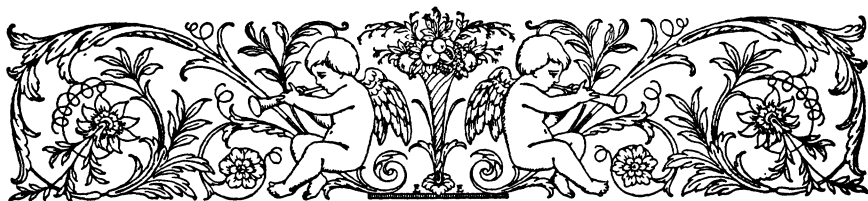
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AGAINST MODERN "ISM"

By CONSTANTIN VON STERNBERG

MUSICAL criticism in recent years has taken the hyper-modern or modernistic composers more and more seriously. Confining itself no longer to an acknowledgement of their unquestionable ingenuity and their novel contributions to the technic of composition, it seems to have allowed these technical matters to mislead its judgment so far as to differentiate no longer between legitimate modernity and its frenzied caricature—*modernism*. Some of the usually serious critics of America and England—not to mention the French and German who speak, of course, *pro domo*—when judging some out-and-out modernistic work, impress one of late very much like the man who, upon being told that a live fish was walking in a certain street, laughed very heartily—at first; but as more and more people rushed by his window in the direction of that street to see the wonder and some of them urged him to come along, his laugh gradually abated; he began to feel uncertain, then shrugged his shoulders, finally put on his hat and followed the hoaxed throng, saying: "Well—maybe—who knows?"

This attitude of earnest critics must cause great alarm among such musicians and music-lovers as demand from the divine art more than mere "cleverness." They must needs feel dismayed by seeing high praise bestowed upon compositions which, technically clever though they are, lack the very fundamentals of art, Ethos and Sincerity. In the presence or, as it may be, the absence of these two elements lies the chiefest difference between art and artifice—in other words, between modernity and modernism. A perfect analogy to this distinction can be found by comparing commerce with commercialism where, as with modernism, it is the "ism" that changes the good into the bad.

Commerce enriches a nation, and not only materially, for it also brings people and knowledge from other lands; it causes travel, exploration; it broadens a nation's outlook upon the world; it was traceably, though innocently, the cause of the Renaissance; and it is—or is supposed to be—based upon the principle of “fair exchange.” In one word, commerce is an excellent human *institution*, while commercialism is a reprehensible, greed-begotten *tendency*. Too rapacious to be content with the proper returns of legitimate commerce, commercialism tends to sacrifice the principle of fair exchange on the altar of money-getting; it tends to turn every human endeavor into inordinate monetary gain and to sneer at any effort that is prompted by higher, nobler impulses. It readily takes advantage of the unfortunate with a view to enslave him; and, if he be of the type that regards proper monetary returns as a necessary but natural incidental, Heaven help him! The “ism” implies the abuse of the legitimate for monetary gain *beyond* proper returns; and it is precisely the same with musical modernism, as will presently be seen.

Like the promoters of “get-rich-quick” schemes, the modernists have armed themselves with many arguments which, however, reveal their speciousness upon the slightest scrutiny. Whenever the merit of their work is doubted or denied they say at once that “all innovators were at first antagonized,” and then attempt to support their argument by quoting Palestrina, Monteverdi, Beethoven, Wagner, Liszt and others. They carefully suppress the facts in those cases. They never mention the sober reality—that Palestrina was not a modernist in any sense; he was a *purifier* of church music, rather the opposite of a modernist. Monteverdi was a contemporary of just such a type of dilettantic modernists as infest our time; he did use some of their “stunts,” but only for artistic purposes, not—as they did—for their own sake. He and Palestrina were men of that soul caliber for which the present musical world waits with fervent hope. The name of Monteverdi's modernists may be found in books on the history of music; their works, however, are dead, dead forever, while his own Madrigals are, when properly performed, still full of life and show that he was—for his time—very modern, indeed, but not modernistic by any means. True, he used the unprepared dissonances, suspensions and other harmonic innovations of his contemporaries, where they were applicable with good taste; here and there; as spices; but he supplied, first of all, the substantial musical meat to which to apply them. He did not make a meal of the spices. And he was *not* antagonized by his public. Neither was

Beethoven until he reached—in his latest works—what might be designated as the “period of prophesy.” From the works of this period the public—far from antagonizing him—kept only aloof for a while; which was natural, since prophesies need time for their fulfillment, though the time in his case was not very long. Those “prophetic” works, however, appeared in the last quarter of his life; they were, after all, legitimate extensions of principles under which he had grown up. They were in no sense “departures” from them, while our modernists *begin* their musical life with departures. Monteverdi, too, did not adopt the modern style until late in life. He wrote his first opera “Ariane” at forty. Verdi changed his style with “Aida” at the age of fifty-seven. That Wagner was antagonized is true, but it was a purely personal antagonism partly called forth by his pugnacious personality and partly by the—more or less secret—orders from the reigning German courts because of his—only too active—participation in the revolution of 1848. The public at large, however, took him to its heart at once, and such musicians as were not directly or indirectly dependent upon the Courts (e.g., Court-conductors) combatted the Court intrigue vigorously, often imperiling their livelihood thereby (the present writer among them). As for Liszt, the most modest and self-effacing of all composers, he was never antagonized by the public; his wider popularity as a symphonist had to wait but a short time until orchestral technic had developed sufficiently to cope with his works.

The argument of antagonism against innovators is cleverly selected to shield any new musical monstrosity and to repel any attack upon it; it might have served this purpose if it did not happen to be the very argument which whilom “Brother Jasper” resorted to. This negro parson preached that “the earth am stand-in’ still, yeth, stockstill and the sun is movin’ roun’ an’ roun’ it.” When he was told that he was being laughed at he consoled his flock and himself by saying: “Tha’s all right! Galileo was laughed at, too, an’ he was to’tured to boot; yeth, my brethren, to’tured!” Galileo and—Brother Jasper! Monteverdi, Beethoven, Wagner and—the little modernists! What a parallel! Would any sincere man take refuge behind such an argument as that of antagonism?

Our modernists claim that every composer has a right to have his own style, and the claim is quite just; but there is a world of difference between style and mannerism and of this difference they seem to be quite unaware. “Style” is a personal, characteristic way of expressing a thought, and it demands dignity and

distinction. It applies, not to the thought, but to its expression. It is one feature in the physiognomy of a work, not the work itself. It is a trait which adapts itself to any thought. Beethoven's E flat Concerto differs so entirely from the Chopinesque one in G major that, were it not for the style, one could scarcely believe them to have come from the same mind. The same diversity of thought, unharmed by the sameness of style, prevails in his Symphonies, Quartets, Sonatas, etc. With our modernists matters are reversed: instead of dressing their thoughtlets in their favorite manner, they handle only such little ideas as will fit their stereotype manner of dressing.

"Eulenspiegel, Don Quixote, Salome, Electra"—are they images of normal humans swayed by some great passion? Are they not, musically, grotesque caricatures, and have their literary originators not intended some of them to be caricatures? There is, of course, no reason why a musician should not occasionally indulge in caricature; Wagner did it in the "Meistersinger"; but—is caricature a musical life-pursuit? The mannerism of Richard Strauss makes one suspect that he aims at the questionable honor of being called a "musical Hogarth."

Another one of our modernists pussyfoots, like a cat in a china closet, over all sorts of possible and impossible discords; of course, *pianissimo*, feeling quite rightly that, after all, there are *some* things which should not be said "right out loud." He has discovered the venerable hexatonic scale—(*pereant quæ ante nos*)—and with it and the everlasting chords of the ninth and eleventh he succeeded in producing what may cheerfully be granted to be a new "color"; but since it blinded him to all other colors his compositions sound all alike. This is sheer, unmitigated *mannerism*, not style. He, like all the modernists, does not fit the clothes to the children of his brain; he selects the children to fit the clothes.

It might be said that without intrinsic merit the works of the modernists could not have acquired the vogue which the public accords to them. Vogue? Indeed? Vogue, that French euphemism for "Fad!" Whatever the cause or causes may be, one cannot help noticing that the restlessness and superficiality of modern life has grown to a degree so alarming as to make "vogue" a totally untrustworthy criterion. What dominates our musical time is, unfortunately, no longer artistic merit; it still finds its appreciators, no doubt, in the executive field of music, but in the creative field it is mere sensational novelty that attracts the public. And as sensationalism (another "ism") is by

its very nature of but short-lived attractiveness, the public change their fads almost as often as they do their garments. They are either mentally unequipped or too frivolous to take the time and interest to satisfy themselves as to the depth or shallowness of a composition. And, really, why should they? A kind, fatherly government tells them what to eat and, especially, what to drink; the papers tell them what to wear, what to think, what to hate, what to like; and the public's unwavering obedience to these dictates has almost the dignity of military discipline. Hence, as long as a composition is new—*new*, above all, pleasantly or painfully new—makes enough unnecessary noise (we love noise, don't we?), employs a needlessly huge apparatus, *and* is much spoken of in the papers, the public will toy with it for a while, in utter disregard of the fact that the things in art which were only new never lived long enough to grow old. Thus to the public—taking them by and large—all music is but a *moment musical*, a trifle, soon to be forgotten for the next one.

To prevent this forgetting as long as possible the modernistic sensation manufacturers employ, beside their specious arguments, all the brazen methods of commercialism. Not only do they engage propagandists (some of whom are holding rather high artistic positions), but they also have their press agents. Many papers, daily and weekly, keep public attention alive by the sort of personal gossip which has nothing whatever to do with art; they tell the public “what the great A is *going* to write, when”;—“what the equally great B thinks of writing, some day, possibly, perhaps”;—“what prices they get for their manuscripts; what private quarrels they have with one another.” The pictures of these musical *chevaliers d'industrie* are shown in the papers as they look on board ship, in a canoe, at the tennis court, at breakfast, playing with children, sitting in their library with scholarly pose, in their studio where a photographer caught them—purely by chance, of course—brooding over some deeply problematic piece of music; on horseback, swimming in the sea or, in fact, in any attitude which the late Anthony Comstock or the police would not have objected to.

Our modernists do not stand aside of the whirl and turmoil of the frivolous world, devoting themselves to their ideals and letting the passing show wend its silly way—(shade of Brahms!)—oh, no! They go right into the very thickest of it, straining every nerve to catch the slangy, “jazzy” slogan of the day and, having caught it, they turn not away from it with a pitiful smile, but they chime lustily in.

"Sensations, is it?" they say, "why, you shall have them! Just listen, friends, brothers, fellow citizens! Here are sensations for you that will make your blood curdle and give you the creeps! Here's an Opera, a drama without action; 'Mealy-Ass and Pale-and-Sandy,' seen through a gauze curtain as in a haze. Everything in it is nebulous: scenery, costumes, characters, music—everything! The whole thing as morbid as a morphine dream, as nerveless as a cocaine victim. You need not understand it—it must be 'sensed!' And the music: every harmony an unprepared ninth-chord, every change a jolt to decent ears. Methodically mad. Come one, come all! It's the 'thing!' All the ladies that go to Paris for their gowns say so. They ought to know!"

Here's another sensation: "The Bible dramatized! Ruth? Magdalene? Deborah? Not much!—*Salome!* Perverseness glorified! You'll shudder physically and morally—but morals be hanged, we give you sensations! Isn't that what you want? The old masters gave you what you *needed*; they lifted you to their height, but *nous avons changé tout cela*. We come nicely down to you and give you, not what you need, but what your esthetic demoralization and morbidity craves!"

Nice ethics, that! And why all this to-do? What for? Only and exclusively for the *laus dives plebei* in terms of coin which the late Vespasian regarded as "odorless." Modernism—commercialism!

In the opening paragraph of this discussion will be found an unstinted acknowledgement of the modernists' ingenuity. Their orchestral "effects," though mostly without "cause"; their harmonic twists and kindred hocus pocus tricks, are certainly ingenious; but the first syllable of "ingenius" declares the absence of genius. Ingenuity provides new means—genius has new purposes. Ingenuity does clever things—genius does great things. Ingenuity contrives—genius creates. Ingenuity—and this is an essential point—acts *consciously*, genius acts *unconsciously*. No fair-minded critic can dispute the modernists' ingenuity, for they do some remarkably crafty things. They must have brooded over them like Mime over the broken sword, and over their—often cacophonic—harmonies they must have worked very hard; so hard, indeed, that—from too much sedentary work—they all contracted the musical asthma. They seem to be no longer able to think a melodic thought out to its natural, logical ending; they start it, one measure or two, maybe three, and then—phft—the breath gives out; they have to take a fresh breath and—start something else. Their works—like Kipling's "Bandarlog"—seem

all the time on the verge of achieving something, but—again like the Bandarlog—they never come to anything more substantial than noise. There is never any real development, no real flow—only broken scraps of sentences, a starveling dribble of ideas.

Nevertheless it may be cheerfully granted that some—or even many—of their innovations are well worth preserving until—well—until some real master, some *genius* appears who will—to speak with Handel—"know vat to do mit 'em;" who will use them *à la* Monteverdi, for purposes *beyond* themselves; who will handle them with sovereign mastery, as an architect may employ some new building material. Until this master appears, the modernists can be regarded only as purveyors or furnishers of just such material; *technical* material of which the ethical value in the field of composition is not much higher than—*mutatis mutandum*—that of Czerny's studies in the field of piano playing. The industriousness of the modernists deserves credit, no doubt (so did Czerny's and Clementi's); but when their doings begin to affect young students, causing them to neglect the great masters, as so many of them do; when these students go into raptures over a little detail like a new chord-succession and lose the solid ground on which the marvelous edifice of music is built, until they get lost in a mire of cacophony—the time has come for a word of serious warning.

Our ear is a defenseless and, therefore, a very complaisant organ. It is in one respect like the stomach. As the latter can become accustomed to poisons like arsenic or cocaine, so can the ear (only too easily) become accustomed to any sound, from an alarm clock to a distonating vocalist. This complaisance of the ear, due principally to its defenselessness, should neither be abused nor speculated upon; on the contrary, the ear should be kept so keenly sensitive as to reject any cacophony that is not justified by musico-dramatic necessity and sparingly, judiciously used. As the medical effect of poisonous drugs depends entirely upon the dosage and becomes injurious by over-prolonged use, so do musical discords lose their dramatic effects altogether when through their over-frequency our ear becomes accustomed to them.

As for the plea that our modernists have a new "message to the world," the reply to it was furnished long ago by a very wise man who said:

*I hear the message well enough—
—alas, I don't believe it.*